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Over the last 6 years, I have served in both houses of the state Legislature and in Congress. Overspending and the consequent deficits have plagued both the state and federal governments during all of that time. These deficits have arisen and persisted despite good economic times and rising government revenues. They continue in a state Legislature controlled by Democrats and in a Congress controlled by Republicans.

Why? What causes the systemic propensity of legislative bodies to spend more money than they have? Here is some anecdotal evidence from my personal experience:

- In my first 100 days in Congress, I received nearly 70 requests for “earmarks.” Earmarks are the process by which individual members of Congress can direct federal money to specific projects in their districts. The requests were from public agencies and private businesses in the 48th District and totaled in the hundreds of millions of dollars.
- Putting the earmarks aside, in about 80% of the meetings I have had since getting to Congress, someone has asked for taxpayer money to either expand an existing program, fund a charity or cause they champion, or develop an entirely new program. Rarely does the person asking for the money suggest we cut spending to make room for what they want.
- It is called a “cut” even when the program continues to grow. The Medicaid growth rate was recently reduced from 7.7% to 7.5%. Yet, critics are decrying the unconscionable “cut!”

- Congress has built airplanes and jet engines that the military doesn't want because an influential member of Congress wants to keep a factory open in their district. I have seen highway interchanges built in a state legislator's district that state and regional authorities didn't want.

Different interests ask their representatives for money - lots of them, for lots of money. Many times they are for very worthy causes that serve a public purpose. Sometimes the requests are for more specific interests or for the personal benefit of the person or organization making the request.

The easiest way for the legislator to make friends is to tell these constituents "yes." Yes, I'll request your earmark. Yes, I'll write a letter asking to increase spending in that area by \$40 million. Yes, we'll put that \$200 million construction project in the budget.

When 120 legislators or 535 members of the House and Senate say "yes" to multiple people, spending spirals out of control. Frankly, it's hard to tell people "no." I have had to do it a lot lately, 63 times, because we can't afford everything we want.

The propensity to say "yes" isn't limited to earmarks or new programs. More than half of what the government spends gets an automatic "yes" without even one vote from Congress. This entitlement spending increases as a percentage of the budget every year and will amount to nearly two-thirds of all spending a decade from now.

It is not like saying "yes" is a new phenomenon; 33 out of the last 37 years the government has spent more than it took in.

The people making the requests for more spending and the things they are requesting are not, on the whole, bad. And the legislators saying "yes" are not bad people either. But saying "yes"

too much can be bad.

One of Winston Churchill's more recognizable quotes is that, "democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." In the same way, representative government cannot and should not be condemned because people petition it, or because elected officials respond to those petitions.

What all of this does mean is that we need an external discipline to control this natural propensity to overspend. We all have such external factors at work in our everyday lives that control our personal spending. Maybe a bank won't lend you any more money because you are too leveraged. Maybe your shareholders or your boss are not happy with the expenses in your division. Maybe your spouse or parent took away your credit card because too much was charged.

Congress is no different. We need spending control legislation. Something that tells Congress this is the total amount you can spend. No more. So, if you want that research project funded, fine. Just cut something else in the budget so it all fits.

You'll hear a lot more from me in the near future about how to do this. In the meantime, if you come to see me about spending more money please bring along a suggestion of who we should say "no" to so I can say "yes" to you.